

The JFK Committee: See No Evil

The first week of the House Assassination Committee's hearings into the murder of John Kennedy fascinated millions but disappointed long-time followers of assassination research. Many items were publicly aired that further damaged the Oswald-as-lone-assassin theory, but the committee, as we predicted two weeks ago, is clinging to that theory to the point of ignoring evidence that doesn't fit. The first five days of hearings addressed the actual gunplay in Dallas's Dealey Plaza. Medical, ballistics, acoustical and other criminological evidence was presented. Witnesses with material unresponsive of the lone-assassin theory, such as pathologist Cyril Wecht and former Texas Governor John Connally and his wife, were, as was proper, critically questioned at great length. But those with testimony favorable to the committee's thesis were let off with frustrating ease, and were seldom asked about even the most well-known material that conflicts with what they presented. Some examples:

The "single bullet theory," which holds that one shot hit both Kennedy and Connally, requires that the bullet went all the way through Kennedy's body. When Dr. James J. Humes, who performed the autopsy on Kennedy, was on the stand, the committee failed to ask him about the famous FBI report that he probed the president's back wound and found it only penetrated a couple of inches. Maybe Humes would have retracted or explained away his original story, which has been a stock item in some conspiracy scenarios, or maybe he would have stuck by it; the committee was uninterested.

The committee was able to take its pick of other, often contradictory material in building its reconstruction of the shooting. Humes, for instance, had determined that the alleged entrance

wound in the back of Kennedy's head was at the crown of the skull, but the committee's medical panel instead accepted contrary testimony that it was four inches lower. Other persons at the autopsy told the Warren Commission there was no entrance wound at all in the back of the head, but rather that the whole back of the head was blown away. The committee ignored these statements.

The committee presented a ballistics expert, admittedly untrained in pathology, who asserted that the backward jerk of Kennedy's head and body upon impact of the fatal head shot was a neuromuscular spasm — not an indication that the shot came from the grassy knoll in front of him. This explanation, first officially offered by the Rockefeller commission in 1975 and rejected by photo experts hired by CBS-TV in 1976, was received by the committee uncritically. Crucial questions went unasked, such as how to explain the backward burst of debris from Kennedy's brain and skull, so forceful that a motor-cycle cop behind the limousine said the debris stung him.

Ballistics experts were allowed, without any follow-up questioning, to claim Oswald's first shot was "easy." Whether or not this was true, it was not the issue. The issue has always been the subsequent rapid-fire shots, and they went unmentioned. Many attempts have been made to try to demonstrate that such fast and accurate shooting was possible, let alone easy.

Dr. James Barger, a scientist from the Cambridge firm of Bolt, Beranek, and Newman, presented the analysis of the Dallas police tape-recording of the assassination. The tape, he reported, indicates that four shots may have been fired, not Oswald's alleged three. Judging from recordings of recent reenactments of the

shootings, he said, the third of the shots came from the grassy knoll.

The committee's efforts to debunk this possibility bordered on desperation. The committee interrogated Barger at great length and attacked the idea that the extra noise was a gunshot, and showed no apparent interest in the intriguing fact that it allegedly came from the one other place in Dealey Plaza where eye and ear witnesses place a gunman. (The committee, in its review of the photographic evidence, also left out the films and photos of spectators and a policeman with gun drawn racing toward the knoll moments after the shooting.)

The tape-recording indicates 1.6 seconds between the first and second shots. Committee chief counsel Robert Blakey announced that initial tests indicate the alleged murder weapon could be fired within that interval. This claim is ludicrous; nobody has been able to fire two shots within 1.6 seconds with such a rifle. The FBI concluded for the Warren Commission that it would take 2.3 seconds minimum without even aiming the gun. The Warren Commission, in fact, said it came up with the single-bullet theory — which Blakey is now defending — largely in order to keep Oswald from having to fire so fast.

One false piece of evidence that sailed by unchallenged was the statement by one expert that no witnesses on the railroad overpass next to the grassy knoll said they saw a shot from the knoll. In fact, at least five witnesses on the overpass told the Warren Commission a shot came from the knoll. Three said they saw a puff of smoke there. A filmed interview of one of them, Sam Holland, describing his view of the grassy-knoll shot has been shown to large audiences for the last decade.

Kennedy's brain mysteriously disappeared from Parkland Hospital before it could be examined to determine the direction of the

fatal bullet wound. Blakey put forth the guess that Robert Kennedy ordered it destroyed so it would never be subjected to the public's gaze. There is no reason to suppose this is so, nor does it explain why microscopic slides of Kennedy's skull, of interest only to pathologists, were gone along with the brain. The explanation added to the impression that the committee's greatest priority is to put troublesome material aside.

Now that the committee has wrapped up the events in Dealey Plaza, it is moving to explore Oswald's background. The first witness was his wife, Marina. Other witnesses may be former CIA Directors William Colby and Richard Helms, current CIA Director Stansfield Turner, and former head of CIA counterintelligence James Angleton.

Also testifying may be the famous "umbrella man" filmed at the assassination site, who has apparently been located. According to Dallas newspapers, he will divulge that he was raising his umbrella as a political protest; he supposedly will say he felt Kennedy was appeasing the Russians, and meant to call up images of Neville Chamberlain by waving an open umbrella.

Two possible witnesses who won't be testifying are Regis Kennedy, an FBI agent in New Orleans when Oswald was there, and Thomas Karamessines, director of operations for the CIA during the early 1960s. (Former CIA agent Victor Marchetti has claimed Karamessines was one of the CIA officials ordered by Helms to help defend New Orleans businessman Clay Shaw in his Kennedy-conspiracy trial by District Attorney Jim Garrison.) Both men died recently of apparently natural causes. Regis Kennedy the day before committee investigators tried to reach him. Harvey Yazjian